

## PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The federal action considered in this environmental assessment (EA) is to implement fire management guidelines for Montana/Dakotas Bureau of Land Management (BLM) which follow the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (December 1995 and the January 2001 Amendment and Update). These guidelines place new emphasis on managing fuels to reduce the risk of wildfire to urban interface areas and to reduce natural resource damage from wildland fires. These guidelines also change some tactics which BLM uses to suppress certain wildfires.

A change in fire management strategies and tactics is needed to 1) reduce the risk and cost of severe wildland fires; 2) sustain the ecological health and function of grasslands, shrublands and forest ecosystems that are fire adapted; 3) minimize the adverse impacts of wildland fire suppression; and 4) use fire to reduce hazardous fuels while meeting other resource management objectives.

### Background

During the 2000 fire season, the Northern Rockies experienced 4,065 wildland fires that burned 1,083,863 acres. More than 12,900 BLM acres were burned, 250 structures were destroyed (including 80 primary residences), and suppression costs were approximately \$500 million. In recent years, wildland fires in forests and on ranges have burned hotter, bigger, and faster, growing ever more lethal, destructive, and expensive to fight. Between 1987 and 1998, the BLM responded to more than 1,500 fires that burned over 265,000 acres in Montana and the Dakotas.

### Scope of analysis

Nearly all of the 8 million acres of public land administered by the BLM in Montana and the Dakotas were historically burned by wildfire and most are still at risk of disturbance by periodic wildfire. This EA addresses fire management guidelines and fuel reduction treatments that are appropriate given other resource management objectives. Guidance for wildland fire suppression and prescribed burning are identified and analyzed. Other vegetation treatments and their environmental impacts are not addressed in this analysis but they are analyzed in BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs) for Montana and the Dakotas and in the 1991 BLM Vegetation Treatment EIS and the various RMPs that guide resource management on BLM administered lands.

The effects of prescribed fire and other fuel reduction projects on public lands will be addressed in site-specific EAs for specific projects. Because wildland fire suppression actions are considered emergency actions under Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, Liability and Recovery Act (CERCLA), only limited environmental review will be made of suppression activities in this analysis.

**Management responsibility and general location and setting:** The BLM has fire management responsibility on more than eight million acres of public land in Montana and the Dakotas. To more efficiently and effectively manage equipment and personnel, the BLM has agreed to provide wildland fire suppression to more than 600,000 acres of other federal and state agency lands in eastern Montana while other federal and state agencies have agreed to provide primary fire suppression to 1.7 million acres of public land for the BLM in western Montana. Each agency, however, is responsible for providing guidance and direction for wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation as well as the use of prescribed fire and other fuels management on the lands for which they have administrative responsibility.

The area covered by this environmental analysis covers two major geographic regions - the Northern Great Plains and the Northern Rocky Mountains in Montana. Most of the area is drained by the Missouri River and its tributaries. Public lands in the Missoula Field Office (formerly the Garnet Resource Area) and a small portion of the Headwaters Resource Area are on the west side of the continental divide and are part of the Upper Columbia River Basin.

### Decisions to be Made

The BLM's Montana State Director will issue a Decision Record (DR) to implement the proposed guidance, to take no action or to select another alternative. If the proposed guidance is selected, some of the resource management plans or one management framework plan (RMPs or MFP) for public lands in Montana/Dakotas that do not comply with the DR will also be amended.

### Document Organization

This EA consists of five sections:

**Purpose and Need:** describes the purpose of and need for the proposed federal action, management responsibility, location, and setting.

**Alternatives:** describes the alternatives considered in detail and provides a summary comparison of alternatives.

**Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences:** describes the environment and other resources that would be affected, and analyzes the impacts.

**Consultation, Coordination, and Public Participation:** describes the scoping process and coordination with the public, agencies, tribal governments, and private organizations that occurred during the preparation of this analysis. A chronology of consultation and coordination is also included.

**References and Appendices:** A list of references and separate appendices to support the analysis are also included. The appendices include a summary of the fire management for each Field Office.

## ALTERNATIVES

This EA compares the potential environmental consequences of past fire management policies and strategies with those that reflect the direction of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (1995) and the 2001 Amendment. Knowledge and understanding has grown since the days when all fires were automatically suppressed. Federal agencies now recognize that fire is a critical natural process that helps maintain healthy ecosystems and guards against natural disasters. The alternatives considered in detail represent two different options for fire management on BLM-administered public lands.

We analyze how fire can be used to help achieve resource objectives identified in land use plans and to reduce dangerous accumulations of fuel. Fire suppression, prescribed burning, and other fuels management options have been studied as methods for using fire management to sustain healthy ecosystems while reducing the risk and cost of fire suppression.

### Alternative A (Continuation of Past Management)

This alternative is referred to as the “No Action” alternative because there would be no change from past management. Management direction in current RMPs and one remaining Management Framework Plan (MFP) provides inconsistent guidance to fire managers. For example, some plans require full and aggressive initial attack on all wildland fires, while others are silent on the topic. Some RMPs also appear to have inappropriate limits on the use of prescribed burning and other hazardous fuels reduction treatments. The issue and opportunities for hazardous fuels reductions, especially near interface areas, were not addressed in most of these planning documents.

Under this alternative, land use and resource management objectives receive less consideration when 1) identifying fire management objectives, 2) developing strategies for wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation, or 3) developing prescribed burn and other fuel management guidance. No amendments would be made to RMPs or the MFP.

#### Fire Management Objectives:

Fire would seldom be used to achieve responsible and definable land use benefits through the integration of fire suppression and prescribed fire as a management tool. Seldom have fire management objectives been integrated with other resource objectives in the land use plans. Too often, past management plans and strategies have not considered fire history, land status, issues, concerns, and other resource objectives. Fire was not desired.

#### Wildland Fire Suppression and Rehabilitation:

Wildland fires would generally be held to the minimum possible size through timely and effective suppression action consistent with values at risk and within framework of land use objectives and plans. Usually, aggressive initial attack would be taken on all fires that occur on or threaten BLM lands. Wildland fires would very seldom be used to accomplish land use and resource management objectives. Other resource management concerns and objectives would often not be considered during wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation.

#### Prescribed Fire and Other Fuels Management:

Prescribed fire may be used to accomplish land use or resource management objectives only when defined in prescribed fire plans. Wildland fires would not be allowed to burn even if it is “in prescription”. Some of the current planning documents limit the use of prescribed fire to very small areas across the entire planning area.

### Alternative B (Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, update of Montana Fire Management Plan, and appropriate RMP amendments)

Alternative B represents the proposed fire management plan and strategies for Montana and the Dakotas. This reflects implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. With this alternative, fire management objectives would be developed following careful